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NEW YORK TIMES
16 June 1985

U.S. Frustrated in Efforts To Counter Soviet Spying

The following article is based on reporting by Joel Brinkley and Leslie H. Gelb and was written by Mr. Gelb.

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 15 — American counterespionage forces are finding themselves understaffed and overwhelmed in trying to combat increasingly advanced and diversified Soviet intelligence operations in the United States, according to senior Government officials.

The officials, who deal with intelligence matters, said the Federal Bureau of Investigation had identified 500 to 800 agents of the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence and internal security agency, among the nearly 2,000 Soviet officials living in the United States.

In addition, the Senate Intelligence Committee has identified at least 200 K.G.B. agents among the 800 members of the Soviet delegation to the United Nations.

The number of agents the F.B.I. has assigned to monitor these Soviet agents and hundreds of others who may be involved in espionage is classified, but Reagan Administration and Congressional officials estimated the number at 300 to 400.

Counterintelligence experts say four agents are required to cover one suspect day and night. "We don't even have a man-to-man defense," William J. Casey, Director of Central Intelligence, said in an interview.

In interviews, officials from the F.B.I., the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and other Government agencies and members of Congress said these problems helped to explain how John A. Walker Jr., charged with leading an espionage ring, might have passed vital secrets to Soviet agents for nearly 20 years without being detected.

Calls for Improvement Made

Because of the charges against Mr. Walker, members of Congress and others are calling for significant improvements in American counterespionage capabilities. This week the Senate and House Intelligence Committees and the information subcommittee of the House Government Operations Committee began investigations of those issues.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Ver-

mont Democrat who is vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said: "How many other cases like this are there sitting out there? We have to assume the other Soviet intelligence agents are out there doing something, and we aren't catching them."

Although American intelligence officials agree that the K.G.B. has expanded and improved its operations in this country, there is debate over whether the Soviet intelligence service is now a formidable force or merely a competent one.

Edward J. O'Malley, director of the F.B.I.'s intelligence division, said, "Our objective is to know everything any given intelligence officer is doing in the U.S. at all times." At the same time, Mr. O'Malley acknowledged, "I cannot say we can follow every Soviet 24 hours a day," although he asserted that the bureau, by using electronic surveillance and "certain other legal techniques," was "in a good position to severely hurt their intelligence-gathering activities."

The officials agreed that the situation would be worse if Congress had not insisted on increasing the number of American counterintelligence agents over the last several years, despite opposition from the bureau and the Justice Department.

Intelligence sources have attributed this opposition to bureaucratic concerns and to the difficulty of finding qualified agents.

Expansion of Soviet Forces

While the Government has debated the number of counterintelligence agents it needs, the Soviet Union has improved and expanded its intelligence operations here, senior officials said.

Over the last decade, intelligence officials said, Moscow has more than doubled the number of intelligence officers assigned to the United States while at the same time broadening their operations to focus on American technology and military industries.

In the past Soviet officers worked chiefly in only four or five major cities, including New York, Washington and San Francisco. But Mr. O'Malley said they now operate nationwide.

In addition, past and present intelligence officials say the quality of K.G.B. agents has significantly improved since the days when American officers said they could easily spot

them by their baggy pants and awkward English.

"They can now blend in, in speech, manner, dress and education," said a former senior intelligence official. Still, Administration officials acknowledge that there is a continuing and perhaps irresolvable debate over the extent of K.G.B. capabilities and operations in this country.

Most intelligence officials say they believe that American intelligence operations are better than those of the K.G.B. but that the K.G.B. does not require as much skill to operate effectively in America's open society.

Shortcomings in U.S. Operation

Interviews with numerous current and former intelligence officers, along with members of Congress and other Government officials, also brought to light these points:

¶The F.B.I. can regularly monitor only the known Soviet intelligence officers, giving scant attention to suspected officers, and surveillance of even the known agents ends when their lights are turned out in the evening and they are presumed to be sleeping.

¶American officials believe a large number of Soviet agents have slipped into the United States illegally and are living and working here and reporting directly to Moscow. With rare exceptions, Federal officials say they do not know who or where they are.

¶The F.B.I. faces another potentially large problem in that about 1,000 Soviet émigrés, many naturalized American citizens, work in military industries and have access to classified information. The F.B.I. assumes these people are loyal Americans, but because most of them still have families in the Soviet Union the bureau believes they are vulnerable targets for the K.G.B.

¶Soviet officers place special emphasis on trying to recruit American agents, but most Americans who spy for the Soviet Union are volunteers, not recruits, bureau officials say. Soviet officers also use Americans who can be unknowingly tricked into revealing secrets.

¶Intelligence officials agree that Soviet officers have become increasingly talented at the psychological manipulation of American agents, to insure that once they begin spying they do not stop.

¶As was true with the arrest of Mr. Walker, most espionage arrests are a result of chance. Federal agents learned of Mr. Walker's alleged activities only after his wife decided to turn him in.

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